Semper Fideles (Always Faithful) at a Time of War

Colleagues,

> The flu bug hit me this week. So I’m posting someone else’s prose for your ThTh 235 reflection. I know nothing more about author Jim Lewis than what you can read here. ‘Fact is, I don’t even know how this got into our “IN basket.”Although Jim never mentions “left-hand-of-God” rubrics in this essay about war, he could have, I sense. Even if some of you Arch-Augsburgers may detect some left-hand/right-hand mis-meshing on occasion, my hunch is that he’s also working with St. Paul’s axiom in 2 Cor. 5:14ff: “For the love of Christ urges us on . . . [and therefore] from now on we regard no one ‘from a human point of view’ [the Greek term is starker: kata sarka, ‘according to our sinful flesh’].” Christ has now become Paul’s new lens for viewing everyone. Either they already are “in Christ,” and that means already “the new creation.” Or they are at present outsiders, not yet “in.” But that do es not prompt Paul to say: OK, in that case treat them as outsiders and give ’em hell. Instead he counsels us to “regard” them too through the Christic lens. Thus they are potential insiders, and when we regard them thus, they might just “become new” themselves.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Autumn Leaves And A Journey Into Faith

Nations will hammer swords into plows, their spears into sickles, there will be no more training for war. Each person will sit under his or her fig tree in peace. Micah 4:3-4

Notes From Under The Fig Tree
Jim Lewis
November 20, 2002

Autumn Leaves And Thoughts About Being Faithful

A drive over the mountains and a walk in a cemetery, which is what I did last week, puts me in touch with leaves. They are resplendent, and they are falling, and they are in view and und erfoot.

The sight of dying leaves always makes me say, “What a way to die.”

Leaves know how to depart in style, don’t they? Not content for a quiet and unobtrusive disappearance into the earth, they hang on for dear life, spurting and splashing the land with radiant red, yellow and orange just before falling into shadow and soil.

They are like that one last guest at the party who won’t go home without a final loud shout before falling into his car and disappearing down the road.

Back home from mountain roads and scattered tombstones, a cold breeze and a drizzling rain say good morning to me as I pick up the morning paper tossed on the front porch by someone I’ve never met while I slept out of the reach of sound.

I resist the temptation to sink into my big chair only to disappear into the news of the day. Instead, I remain faithful

to my morning discipline-my walk around town. Bundled, I begin the trek beneath an umbrella and the knowledge that another day has begun in this place I call home.

I say that I am "faithful to my morning walk," which means no more than getting out the door and doing what I said I was going to do before I discovered the rain and the chill as an obstacle. But maybe I should take more time with this whole matter of faith and faithfulness-more time than it will take me to traverse the path I've charted for my walk, and the time it takes to eat breakfast and digest the newspaper upon my return.

Maybe leaves aren't content merely to be pressed between the pages of a book. Perhaps those leaves, having shaded me from summer sun, are now able, through their death, to be the transparency through which I am able to see and better understand such things as faith and faithfulness.

The hillside, once green but now making one mad dash to brilliance before sinking into brown and black, has a way of inviting me to explore such things as I myself pass through another season on my way to earth.

Semper Fidelis-Always Faithful

For some time now I have been writing and speaking and organizing around the subject of war.

President Bush has made the "war on terrorism" and a military campaign against Iraq, his top priorities. He seems to me to be hell-bent on taking our nation to war and possibly plunging a whole host of countries into a blood bath.

When war rears its ugly head, I'm like an old fire horse that rushes to answer the alarm. Trying to be faithful to the life I've been given, and the source of that gift, and to the

Christian mission of peacemaking, I'm compelled to answer the alarm. As an ordained minister, knowing the moral issues raised by war, and the pastoral consequences that arise from a war, my response becomes a matter of faith.

An old friend from school days, who also served in the Marine Corps back when I did in the late fifties and early sixties, recently read a copy of these Notes and sent me an e-mail. I think he was somewhat worried about me, because in the e-mail he mentioned the Marine motto "semper fidelis," (always faithful) and wondered if I was still the same guy who had worn the uniform years ago.

That message reminded me of the time back in the late sixties when I was asked to speak at a Rotary meeting in Martinsburg, West Virginia. It was about this time of the year, right before Thanksgiving, and I was asked to give a seasonal message about America and the war we were engaged in with Vietnam.

In the audience was a marine general who had driven over from his home in nearby Shepherdstown. An old marine buddy of mine was working as his aide at that time and had suggested he come to hear me speak.

I used the occasion to say that the war with Vietnam was a tragic mistake, and that patriotic Americans should do everything they could possibly do to bring the troops back home and put an end to the war.

After the talk, the general came over and shook my hand. It felt obligatory. I could tell from his face, and from his entire body, that he had not approved of my message. The consternation between the lines on his face told me that he could not imagine a Marine espousing such a message. I am sure he thought my words bordered on treason and that I had betrayed the emblem we both had served under-semper fidelis.

A learned a lesson that day at Rotary. I learned that a word spoken, in order to be faithful to God, and the vision I'd been given, could very well spark conflict from people who saw loyalty to the nation and faithfulness to God as twins joined at the hip.

Responding to my old friend who wondered whether I had forgotten semper fidelis and the Marine Corps I'd once been a part of, I wrote back to him that being faithful was something I had learned even before I'd gone into the military. I said that it had something to do with having been carried into a church as a baby and splashed with water in a baptismal service in a Baltimore church.

I smile when I think on my baptism and the Marine Corps. Going through the marine corps physical, the corpsman charged with giving me a series of shots discovered the tiny tattoo on my shoulder I'd gotten as a high school boy. In an apologetic way, I told him I was going to have it removed. His response: Don't do that because the tattoo would make it easier to identify me should I become a combat casualty.

That priest who splashed water and traced with his finger the ecclesiastical symbol of the Cross on my forehead had simply done what the tattoo artist had done for fifty cents in a Baltimore Street tattoo parlor. He'd marked me for life and destined me to live under a symbol that challenged me to be faithful to a belief in the overriding power of love through nonviolence.

When Loyalty Leads To Lockstep And Lockjaw

My book reading has slowed immensely, the reason being that I have gotten the part of the stage manager in a local production of Thornton Wilder's play Our Town. One of the things I promised myself when we moved back to Charleston was that I

would get back into community theater. So, for the past month I have been learning a ton of lines and, therefore, a pile of books by my big stuffed chair is gathering dust.

After Our Town closes, maybe I'll have time to read the recently published Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers by Daniel Ellsberg. Until then, I must be content to sample only bits and pieces from various book reviews.

Last month I addressed a group of students at Marshall University. When I mentioned Ellsberg's name, with the exception of a few elderly townspeople who had infiltrated the class, faces glazed over. They knew who Scott Ritter was (the Marine who was an arms inspector with the UN team and who had just returned from Iraq bearing a "don't-go-to-war-with-Iraq" message), but they didn't know anything about the old Marine, Daniel Ellsberg.

For those who might glaze over while reading this part of Notes, I should say that Ellsberg is the man who blew the Vietnam War wide open in 1971 by copying "Top Secret" government documents, which revealed that the war with Vietnam was hopeless and wrong, and giving them to various major newspapers for publication.

Up to the point of making public what have now come to be known as the Pentagon papers, Ellsberg had been a faithful and loyal government official. A combat veteran right straight back from Vietnam, he did work for the State Department and the Pentagon. In one of life's great ironies, he was given the assignment to travel to Vietnam as an analyst of the war, helping to compile the mass of indicting material about our folly half-way across the world.

Returning to Washington from Saigon, Daniel Ellsberg heard

Robert McNamara, then Secretary of Defense, say that in Vietnam "the underlying situation is really worse." Upon landing at Andrews Air Force Base, McNamara told reporters "that we are showing great progress in every dimension of our effort" in Vietnam.

These lies, and the secrecy surrounding them, propelled Ellsberg to finally spill the beans all over the world, as he made the real facts about the world available to the press.

A footnote: President Nixon was responsible for arranging the burglary of Ellsberg's psychiatrist office hoping to dig up a little dirt and discredit him.

Ellsberg was viewed by some as a turncoat. He was seen as being disloyal and not faithful to the motto he had worn so proudly in the Marine Corps-semper fidelis.

Daniel Ellsberg is a hero in an odd way. He faced-up to the fact that the virtue of loyalty, like fine pasteurized milk, can turn sour at a moment's time. Semper fidelis can backfire and become a vice-a vice that can lead individuals and a nation down a disastrous path.

I mentioned Scott Ritter, another Marine, who has become an outspoken critic of war with Iraq. What Ellsberg was to the Vietnam era, Ritter is to us at this moment. I find it interesting that both these men wore the semper fidelis motto as United States Marines, and yet they were able to be loyal to an even higher value-the pursuit of the truth.

When loyalty requires us to walk in lockstep to a drumbeat we are out of step with, the next step, if we stay committed to the march, is lockjaw-a loss of our ability to speak.

With Minnesota and Paul Wellstone much on my mind, I can't help

but see an interesting comparison between the now dead senator and Minnesotan Hubert Humphrey, Vice President under Lyndon Johnson.

During the Vietnam War, Humphrey was the loyal Johnson supporter. He walked lockstep with Johnson's buildup of troops in Vietnam. He was the loyal, faithful lieutenant who squelched his own personal opposition to the war. Because of his loyalty to Johnson, he was inflicted with a massive case of lockjaw. He ground his teeth while hundreds of thousands of people were killed and maimed in Vietnam.

In contrast there was Paul Wellstone, another one of those clay-footed heroes. (I just love the Ellsberg and Wellstone pattern of clay pottery.) Now dead when we need him, he stood his ground and refused to vote against his own conscience when it came to giving away the constitutional power that would make George Bush an emperor rather than the president we elected him to be. Right up to his own death, Wellstone lived out the very quality I look for in an elected official. He was willing to acknowledge that there are some things you have to vote for even though it might cost you an election. Losing an election is better than losing your soul, and, God knows, Wellstone had soul.

Believe me when I tell you that I am no Daniel Ellsberg or Paul Wellstone, but almost ten years ago I had my own struggle over this matter of loyalty.

At that time I was fired by a newly elected bishop in North Carolina. His explanation to me was that I had not been loyal to the retiring bishop. What he meant was that he didn't appreciate my public stance involving another priest who had been fired on what I saw as trumped up charges that involved racial matters.

My views had caused an open disagreement with my bishop at that time, and even though I loyally loved and respected him, I could not avoid disagreeing with him over this matter. My open disagreement with the bishop evidently made the new bishop nervous and so I was handed my walking papers. But it turned out okay in the long run because I avoided a lockstep march off some cliff and the dreaded lockjaw.

Losing One's Faith While Killing Reflexively

Twenty years ago I made my first trip into El Salvador. It was a life changing experience. While there I saw the horror that we as a nation were inflicting on the people of that country. Under the guise of anti-communism and anti-terrorism, we funneled military equipment to a ruthless government that eventually killed over a hundred thousand people and caused about a million people to leave El Salvador and flee here.

While there, I had the opportunity to meet a young reporter by the name of Chris Hedges. At that time he was writing stories for the Christian Science Monitor. He impressed me because he wasn't one of those media people who print U.S. Embassy press releases as news, and he wasn't a reporter who hung around the hotel pool picking up second-hand stories to report as if they were news from the battlefront. Chris was out in the field where bullets were flying and people were dying. His reporting reflected it and whenever I saw his byline, I paid special attention.

His new book, War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning, has just been published, and I gobbled it up between rehearsals. It is an excellent book and I recommend it to anyone concerned about war and the long-term implications of war-a subject that should occupy our attention given the fact that a war with Iraq appears to be inevitable.

Hedges not only looked into the face of the dead in El Salvador, he also covered the Gulf War, battles in the West Bank and Gaza, Nicaragua, Turkey, Sudan, and Bosnia. Returning to the United States, he took seminary classes at Harvard Divinity School in an attempt to gather his experiences into a larger framework. His book is a distillation of what he experienced, and looks at the magnetic forces that draw nations and people into war, along with the consequences of battle.

He observes: "The military histories-which tell little of war's reality-crowd out the wrenching tales by the emotionally maimed. Each generation again responds to war as innocents. Each generation discovers its own disillusionment-often after a terrible price. The myth of war and the drug of war wait to be tasted. The mythical heroes of the past loom over us. Those who tell us the truth are silenced or prefer to forget. The state needs the myth, as much as it needs its soldiers and its machines of war, to survive."

I say that war with Iraq seems to be inevitable because the troops and equipment have been put in place. (The military is already in the region, even on Iraqi soil.) The posture of war has been struck. (President Bush struts like a bantam rooster and crows wherever he goes about grinding Saddam into the ground.) And the battle plan has been made and revealed. (Read Nicholas Lemann's article, "Order of Battle," in the November 18 issue of The New Yorker where we are told the details of how we will "own the Euphrates," and where Iraqi forces will "become the speed bumps on the road to Baghdad" as our troops turn them into "toast.")

This generation, if it is called to war with Iraq, will, as Hedges reminds us, discover its own disillusionment, and surely at an awful price. It is already happening.

Special Forces operating in Afghanistan have already begun to come home. Some are telling us, by word and deed, what the price is for waging war. News reports tell us of a number of violent killings by men who have turned their violent rage onto their wives. Peter Maass, the writer who refuses to shun any story, tells about the men who are trained here to engage the enemy in hand-to-hand combat where they have to look into the eyes of the people they kill (The New York Times Magazine, November 10, "A Bulletproof Mind"). Trained to be emotionless as they shoot or bayonet another human being reflexively, void of emotion, these men are already feeling the stress of such behavior.

Maass quotes Major Peter Kilner, a professor at West Point: "When soldiers kill reflexively-when military training has effectively undermined their moral authority-they morally deliberate their actions after the fact. If they are unable to justify what they have done, they often suffer guilt and psychological trauma."

In 1976, I gave space in the church here in Charleston to a Vietnam veteran's group. They were organizing to affect public policy around the chemical, Agent Orange, which many of them had been hazardously exposed to. They also met to talk about the problems they were having with what has now been called "delayed stress syndrome." That's psychobabble for "my life has been screwed up by war." The stories I listened to when I attended their meetings mirrored the slew of stories I have heard for the past thirty years as I have seen Vietnam veterans in homeless shelters and prisons, in troubled marriages, and in hospitals where they dealt with the "drug of war" by self-medicating on drugs grown in Southeast Asia (and Afghanistan) and sold on their own city streets.

Recently I read that large numbers of soldiers are now turning

to chaplains and mental health officials to find ways out of combat. (It's always interesting to me that a person who can't kill another person is viewed by the military, as psychologically disturbed.) A Gulf War veteran, now chaplain in California, says that, "Some of these infantrymen look like little boys to me, and it's unsettling to put them in harm's way."

I'm on the lookout these days for churches, and other religious communities, who will openly and boldly advertise the fact that they are willing to assist young men and women unwilling to fight in Iraq, or a number of other countries I could name in that region. I long to see a center for nonviolent study in my part of the country (Appalachia, where our nation comes when "it needs its soldiers and its machines of war."), where nonviolent methods to conflict are learned, and where the young are taught negotiation rather than nuclear resolution to world problems.

When we baptize someone into my faith tradition, the entire congregation has to promise that they will "seek Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself." They promise to help shape the newly baptized person into a human being capable both of seeing something eternal in other people, as well as treating people with the respect due such divinity.

On the brink of war, I ask: How can men and women, who rely on Christian chaplains for counsel, engage in "seek and destroy" missions with bayonets, grenades and "smart bombs" designed to turn people into "toast."

I want to know what "terrible price" they must pay for running a bayonet through Christ or having dropped a bomb on a site where a whole host of Jesuses reside.

Winning A War And Losing The Constitution

Speaking of Jesus, there is a Christian scripture that goes like this: "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world but lose his or her soul?" Thinking about the big give away of power by the Congress to President Bush, I want to say: "What does it profit a nation if it wins a war and gives away its Constitution?"

Beginning And Ending In Leaves

A word from Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass that describes President Bush: "ALL you are doing and saying is to America dangled mirages. You have not learn'd of Nature-of the politics of Nature."